

Voices of Modern-Day

Goddesses

by Nancy Pearson Arcellana

Celebration, tradition and voices of modern day goddesses come together in this piece for a "feel" of Hinduism. The beauty of ritual, the strength of cultural norms and the pressures on faith traditions to adapt to the present all unfold through the stories of Hindu women.

This piece is culled from one of the activities during the consultation on Women and Spirituality in Dhulikhel, Nepal, convened by Isis International-Manila and the Institute of Women's Studies of St. Scholastica's College (Manila) in March 1996. The consultation gathered women from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines who shared their experiences, rituals, differences and commonality in faith and spirituality. This "mountaintop" experience is being "captured" in a book featuring articles by renowned resource people, rituals from the various faith traditions, life experiences, discussions and drawings that will be released shortly.

The major religions of the world—which perpetuate particular traditions, systems of faith and worship—all began their journeys with a message of liberation for all: female, as well as male, and all creation. Despite these noble beginnings, organized religions became instruments of oppression as well as liberation, especially for women. In our patriarchal societies, women have been socialized into worshipping more male images of God. This has led to women's devaluation by men in society. The male image has become the norm and women sacrifice their own self esteem and value in the process of belonging to an organized religion.

In a small gathering of women overlooking the majestic Himalayan mountain range in

Nepal, we discovered, celebrated our esteem for the female and our female spirituality—individually and collectively. Though many of us grew up within particular religious traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Islam, Confucian, etc.) and continue to carry certain beliefs, rituals, and practices, we found a common bond in our mutual struggle to overcome the traditions and practices that have oppressed our bodies, minds and spirits. We sought to confront our own illusions, untie the tethers that bind and liberate the voices of the goddesses within us.

The following rituals were conducted in Nepal by Dr. Angur Baba Joshi, a Hindu scholar from Nepal. It highlights aspects of the Hindu tradition, which recognizes more than 33 million gods and goddesses as representations of the spirit of the "ultimate truth" or God that

resides in each and every one of us, female and male, animals, plants, minerals, planets and space—seen and unseen. It is a “weaving together” of parts of a Hindu *Puja* or worship.

The altar is prepared. In the center is a picture of the Goddess Durga, and about this, a variety of plates laden with flowers and leaves, paints (yellow and red), food (fruits, rice and yogurt), and a very small pitcher of water. The altar also has other elements needed for the ritual on hand: a small rope, a small bell, incense, and two special candle holders—the first with one wick, the other with five wicks, all essential to the ritual. And the ritual begins. . .

Angur: This is a prayer for ultimate truth, universal truth and ultimate reality that is God.

Chant: (translated) I bow down to you, the ultimate reality, the ultimate truth, who has entered every part of my body, my mind, my consciousness and everywhere, and who makes me do what I do, per Your will. I bow down to you.

Angur: In Hinduism, our *Puja* begins with the following phrase which is an acknowledgment that “all things are permeated by God,” whoever that God is. You can call God Christ, Allah, Dharma, whatever. That’s the starting point. The mind, your consciousness, has the biggest role to play. Imagine invoking the presence of that ultimate truth in the form of Durga because we’re all women and we’re promoting and advocating the cause, strength, capability, equality and empowerment of women in all forms.



INDEPENDENCE

The Voice of Tradition: Nothing must be done independently by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subject to her father; in youth, to her husband; and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent. (Manu V, 147-148)



Angur Baba Joshi explaining the puja

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Voice of a Modern-Day Goddess: I was married at the age of 11. Today, although there is a law against child marriages, these still take place in the rural areas of Nepal. My husband, who was 12 years old when we married, would go to school and then teach me when he came back. He taught me mathematics, history, geography, English and other things I sought to know. We dreamt a beautiful dream. . . to be the first nuclear physicists in Nepal. My husband did in fact become Nepal’s first nuclear physicist. I was not allowed to continue, because as a female, I could not enter the science laboratories. The humanities was the only path open to me. Instead of studying together with my husband, I became a political scientist and lawyer instead, and this pained me very much.

Chant: I invoke the presence of all the sacred waters of Nepal and India. . . and everywhere.

Angur: I sprinkle the water, place the colors,

flowers, leaves, and the rope around the image of the Goddess Durga. Now, the whole atmosphere, the place of Puja is purified.



PURITY

Voice of Tradition: A woman is considered unclean when she menstruates and after giving birth. The Markandeya Purana says that even her glance at a person makes that person unclean. Speaking to her sullies one. Food that she touches must not be eaten. She is to be shut away from human sight. "A person who touches her becomes impure and untouchable and is purified only by a bath." (Manu V, 85) Even though women are valued for their ability to produce a son, the physiological aspects of that creative power are considered unclean. Therefore, women require purification on a monthly basis by a process of separation and ritual bathing.

Voice of a Modern-Day Goddess: I remember one very difficult time—I was put in our cow shed when I had my first menstruation and kept in there for 15 days. I couldn't touch anything, I couldn't prepare food. I had to stay in the dark and I wasn't allowed to see any men. I wasn't even allowed to go to school. At the time of my first menstruation, there was a big festival—a festival like Christmas for Christians. That time of the year is filled with festivals, unfortunately for me because during my first three menstruation periods, while everyone else was celebrating, I was kept in the cow shed. When I asked my mother why this was happening, she said, "This is the tradition, this is the way we have to be purified." I wept and wept. I've decided I will not do this to my own daughter.

Angur: I invoke the Goddess Durga, symbol of the representation of the ultimate truth, and who represents all 33 million gods and goddesses that stand for the different inclinations and aptitudes of individuals in the world. Befitting every aptitude, they are all just the same, none higher or bigger. It's all the same, just different representations. For example, I'm a daughter to my mother, I'm a wife to my husband, I'm a mother to my son, different but the same.



PURPOSE

Voice of Tradition: Woman serves no purpose when her husband is dead. She who lives without her husband lives a miserable life . . . Death is preferable to one who has lost her husband. She who lives even for a moment after being separated from her husband—that sinful woman, lives in great misery and in hell. (Adi Parwa I, 121:20)

Voice of a Modern-Day Goddess: I recently lost my dear husband. He was so close to me, and we shared a happy life for more than half a century. I saw a bird parting from my life. I asked myself, "What should I do? Do I stop everything altogether or should I continue to live my life?" I had to make that decision. My husband was a very spiritual man. He would tell me about the universe, one solar system, one little earth, one little country, one little capital, one little house, one little room, and one little you and me. One is there for the other. You know, in that context, he would tell me about the infinity of time, the infinity of the universe. So I thought that maybe we are alive in that one little place with God's grace. My guru was there with me when my husband died. He is guiding me in my spiritual path. Now, I see myself as a flower, blooming within, blooming outside a little bit also.

Chant: Durga, please come and stay here while I do *Puja*.

Angur: We put water, flowers, *dugo*—a green leaf similar to evergreen pine needles in appearance, and the other elements at the holy feet of Durga.

One characteristic of *dugo* is that it never dies. It is highly esteemed, and a garland made of *dugo* is always used in auspicious occasions. I preserved the *dugo* garland from my marriage for 25 years. I used to dip it into the water overnight and the next day it would look fresh again. Symbolically, *dugo* represents the deathlessness of life.

(Angur lights the incense and rings the bell.)

Now Goddess is very happy. We close our eyes and imagine that the Goddess Durga is here, enjoying the fruit and the sweets we have offered. There is no restriction about the quality or quantity of food to offer.



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Angur Baba Joshi puts the tika on the author's forehead during one of the mountaintop Puja

Chant: It doesn't matter, what it is you have. What matters is that you present it to me with a pure heart.

Angur: The Goddess is beautiful as she is and it is our childish attempt to make her more so with the very elements which she has created for us.



EQUALITY

Voice of Tradition: The Upanishads of Hindu literature and sacred texts depict a male-female equality, especially in relation to creation. One god alone, the Creator, was inadequate; creation required a she-god and a he-god, after which all the beings of creation came into existence.

Voice of a Modern-Day Goddess: In Hinduism, we believe everything is sacred. All living

things in nature are gods and goddesses. We worship rivers, snakes, sun, moon, trees, everything—because that is respecting nature, that is respecting God. Matter itself is a god or goddess, and the beings in this world are gods and goddesses. Siva is a man, Kali and Durga are women. Therefore, we ourselves are gods and goddesses. I started thinking, perhaps I'm a goddess with supernatural powers. God gave birth to creation, I gave birth to my children—I have the power of creation. When my children ask, "What is God?", I answer, "I am God, you are God." Respecting the dignity of life—that is religion to me. That is how I came to work for people, the disadvantaged, the down-hearted. My work has become my form of worship.

Angur: We sit here with our pure hearts devoted to the ultimate truth in the form of Goddess Durga. And we offer her these humble presents which she has bestowed on us. We imagine that she's enjoying it, that she's

blessing us and asking us to purify ourselves further and be as empowered as she is. Empowerment with a lack of purity is impossible. The purer you are, the more empowered you are. We close our eyes and imagine that Goddess Durga is here right by our side and she's showering blessings on us.

Chant: For our outside prosperity in the world and for our inner peace and happiness. Inner peace and happiness, here and now, and beyond.



The Voice of Tradition: "The teacher is ten times more venerable than a sub-teacher, the father a hundred times more than the teacher, but the mother a thousand times more than the father." (Manu II, 145)

Voice of a Modern-Day Goddess: In Hinduism, the customs are what we live with. And right from the beginning, I've been questioning some of them and trying to change things in my own little way. The beauty about these cultural practices is that nobody stops you and says, "Ha!, what are you doing?" There is so much space that we don't use.

For example, traditionally, girls cannot perform death rites. We are not even supposed to touch the dead body, nor carry this. Only men are allowed to do these things. But for my mother's and the three other deaths in my family, I was one of those who carried the body and nobody stopped me. They tried to stop me and said, "Daughter, daughter, you know girls don't do this." I said, "Never mind, I did this to them when they were alive, I feel like doing it now." Nobody said anything after that. Later on, in fact, I heard many of them even appreciated what I had done. We have this space which we don't use. We ourselves are hesitant. We begin to doubt whether our loved one will go to heaven if we touch the body. A lot of it I find is our problem, we have internalized these things.

Angur: Because we live in this material world, we cannot always give the fullest possible respect to the Goddess at all times. What we are doing now is asking her to remain, prevalent all over, within and without, and to please excuse us that we shall not be able to maintain this concentration always.

Chant: Whatever I do, by my mind, my words, my body, by my natural inclinations also, whatever I do, oh Goddess, I present it all to you. It is not me doing it, it is you working through me.

(Angur prepares the *tika* or blessing, mixing the yogurt, paint and rice into a sticky paste.)

Custom dictates that the person who has done the *Puja* has to wear the *tika* first and then give it to the others.

(Angur puts the paste on the forehead of all the women.)

Chant: Let your physical body be very healthy always, and your mind be always cheerful and peaceful. May you be always able to serve the needy, and may you live for a hundred years.

Angur: With the blessing of Goddess, I pray for all of you, that what I do now guide all of us, physically, mentally, intellectually, and spiritually. That we may all, together, be able to serve the needy in the name of God, who is blessing us, as we work as God's instruments. May Goddess Durga bless us all.



Postscript: The celebration/ritual concluded with loud shouts of praise from the Nepalese women. Clearly, they felt alive and regenerated. So did the others. The mood was electrifying, despite the chilly early morning mountain air. A Nepalese sister turned to me and said, "You look beautiful with the *tika*. Whether it was this or the sense of belonging and gratitude for life that I felt as we celebrated the presence of God in the form of Goddess Durga, I don't know. What I do know is that something did happen to me during the celebration because I felt beautiful!☺

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